

The New York Times

Kremlin Denies Flynn Influenced Decision on Sanctions



Michael T. Flynn, the former national security adviser to President Trump, after his plea hearing in Washington last week. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

By Ivan Nechepurenko (<https://www.nytimes.com/by/ivan-nechepurenko>) Dec. 4, 2017

MOSCOW — The Kremlin said on Monday that it was “absurd” to suggest that President Vladimir V. Putin was influenced in any way by a request from the Trump transition last December to refrain from retaliating against sanctions imposed by President Barack Obama over Russian meddling in the election.

“The president makes his own decisions, guided solely by Russia’s national interests,” said the Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov.

President Donald J. Trump’s former national security adviser, Michael T. Flynn, pleaded guilty (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/01/us/politics/michael-flynn-guilty-russia-investigation.html?_r=1) last week to lying to the F.B.I. about conversations he had with the Russian ambassador to Washington at the time, Sergey I. Kislyak. In court papers released as part of the plea agreement (<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4317991/Flynn-Information.pdf>), he said he had urged the Kremlin to hold its fire.

Mr. Kislyak later told Mr. Flynn that Russia had chosen “to moderate its response to those sanctions as a result of his request,” according to the court documents.

On Dec. 30, despite widespread expectations of a tough retaliation that had already been announced

(http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2583996_p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB)

by the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, Mr. Putin released a statement saying that Russia will not respond in kind.

“Although we have the right to retaliate, we will not resort to irresponsible ‘kitchen’ diplomacy but will plan our further steps to restore Russian-U.S. relations based on the policies of the Trump administration,” Mr. Putin said in the statement (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53678>).

Despite the account in the court documents — which was based on intelligence intercepts — Mr. Peskov, the Kremlin’s spokesman, dismissed as incredible Mr. Flynn’s version of events. “Flynn could not have asked Sergey Ivanovych about anything,” he said of the former ambassador. “Moreover, these requests could not have been passed on to the Russian president.”

Russian lawmakers and pro-Kremlin commentators said that far from damning, Mr. Flynn’s plea proved once again that the investigation being led by the special prosecutor, Robert S. Mueller III, into collusion between Mr. Trump’s presidential campaign and the Russian government is a pointless exercise.

“Mueller has nothing on Flynn,” said Aleksei K. Pushkov, a member of the Federation Council, the upper house of Parliament. “Witch-hunters are returning empty-handed,” he said in his Twitter account, calling the whole Russia interference inquiry “a bag of smoke.”

The Kremlin has denied repeatedly there was any centralized effort to interfere with the presidential election, asking for hard proof. In fact, the American intelligence services have identified two Russian hacking groups, (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/russia-hack-election-dnc.html>) code named Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear, that spearheaded the effort.

Konstantin I. Kosachyov, another senator, said Mr. Flynn’s plea shows that he was trying to influence the Kremlin, not vice versa.

“This doesn’t add anything to the ‘Russian conspiracy’ theory,” Mr. Kosachyov wrote in his Facebook account, describing the situation as “the theater of the absurd.”

Other commentators went further, suggesting that the series of disclosures emanating from Washington about possible Kremlin interference is an effort to destabilize the political situation in Russia before its own presidential election, scheduled for next March.

“This is another turn in the war against Trump and Russia,” said Vyacheslav A. Nikonov, a State Duma deputy, on Russia’s prime political talk show on Sunday. “In the coming months, we can expect this campaign to escalate, as we approach toward our election.”

Aleksandr Domrin, a professor at the Higher School of Economics, suggested that Mr. Flynn will tell the Mueller investigation what it wanted to hear in order to win a more lenient sentence for his plea.

“In order to rescue himself, his former adviser Flynn can ‘recall’ at his testimony in front of the Mueller commission something that has not happened,” Mr. Domrin told Komsomolskaya Pravda, a popular tabloid. “If real proof of ‘Trump’s collusion with the Russians’ existed, it would have been presented already one year ago.”

(https://www.facebook.com/dialog/feed?app_id=9869919170&link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2017%2F12%2F04%2Fworld%2Fputin-flynn-kislyak-sanctions.html&smid=fb-share&name=Kremlin%20Denies%20Flynn%20Influenced%20Decision%20on%20Sanctions.html)
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Here are some other revelations and clues to be found in Mr. Flynn’s court documents.

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